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**Analyzing The Policy Impact of The Olympic Strategy on The Soccer
Professionalization in China**

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Professionalization in China**

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Dedication

To all the people who support me

Abstract

Analyzing The Policy Impact of The Olympic Strategy on The Soccer Professionalization in China

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The U23 regulations in the Chinese professional soccer have received many criticisms since the implementation in 2017. Despite the administrative reform and the approval of the long-term soccer development plan in 2015, the most recent elite development policies in professional soccer are considered having inherited the Olympic Strategy and conflicting with the professionalization prospects. Research has paid attention to the role of the Olympic Strategy on Chinese professional soccer but has yet made any response to the controversial policy conflict at present. This study uses a case study methodology to analyze the policy impact of the Olympic Strategy on the soccer professionalization in China. Extracting meanings from policy documents through three decades produced by various organizations, the study finds that policymakers in Chinese elite sport system justify the prioritization of developing Olympic athletes in three major patterns, which are based on performance, organization, and ideology. The rationales of

the latest U23 regulations show that such Olympic-centric patterns have not ceased effects regardless of the unprecedented level of soccer development plan initiated two years ago. The findings suggest that the Olympic Strategy remained the priority of Chinese elite sport system after the Beijing Games and has been in policy conflicts with the soccer professionalization at the elite development level. Consequently, the overemphasis on the pathway of developing Olympic athletes over professional athletes diminishes the professionalization efforts.

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Introduction

On February 27, 2015, the 10th conference of the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms approved *2016-2050 The Mid-to Long-Term Development Plan of Chinese Football*. In this first long-term development plan for soccer in the history of Chinese sports, the development of soccer is elevated to an unprecedented level that it is “imperative for becoming an advanced sport power” and “fervent expectation of Chinese people” (RDDSC, GAS & ME, 2016). Two years later, the Chinese Football Association established and revised a series of regulations on the U23 players’ requirements in professional leagues. Since the implementation, the repercussions expressed concerns on various negative effects including deteriorated league playing quality, shrinking league brand value and unfairness due to age limitations. Although the CFA has gained massive autonomy through the administrative reform in 2015 that ceased the operation of the Soccer Management Center, the U23 regulations are deemed as a product of the Olympic Strategy.

By examining the factors leading to international sporting success, scholars have acknowledged the power of meso-level policy factors in determining elite sport success (De Bosscher, De Knop, Van Bottenburg, & Shibli, 2006). Moreover, there is qualitative and quantitative evidence that supports the “demonstration effect,” which could help facilitate specific Olympic legacies including the sport development legacy (Hindson, Gidlow, & Peebles, 1994; Hogan & Norton, 2000). Whereas literature in mega-events legacy studies demonstrates a bifurcated nature of elite development legacy, which entails not only the Olympic athletes but also the professional athletes (Green, 2004).

Analysis has shown how the Olympic Strategy became the priority of Chinese elite sport policy and led to the 2008 Beijing Olympics' success. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the Olympic Strategy reinforces its status while the soccer professionalization sacrifices due to an imbalanced elite development legacy between the Olympic and professional athletes in the post-Beijing Games era. Past research in the field of Chinese soccer has focused on factors that give rise to the policy conflicts between soccer professionalization and the Olympic Strategy. Several studies have highlighted the Chinese unique administrative model in governing soccer, pointing out that the GAS, the government department of sport, possessed tight control of the CFA (Fan & Lu, 2013; Tan & Bairner, 2010; Liang, 2014). Some researchers have also recognized the tension between clubs and national sport administration over youth development and national team recruitment (Liang, 2013).

Although researchers have examined the role of state and the Olympic Strategy in the soccer professionalization to various degrees, few have systematically studied how national-level elite development policies might contribute to the adverse situations in professional soccer such as the widely-criticized U23 regulations. Due to the immediacy of the U23 regulations, there has been little scholarly publication on this recent case. Thus far, knowledge of how such policy conflict arises or works has little presence neither in the literature of Chinese national sport policy nor professional soccer. Additionally, it has not been long since the implementation of the 2015 long-term plan, so whether and to what extent the administrative reform in soccer has brought change to the prioritized Olympic Strategy is still unclear.

To further the understanding of the Olympic Strategy's policy impact on the soccer professionalization can benefit the study of the Chinese elite sport system's development, especially after the 2008 Beijing Games. This analysis will also contribute knowledge to several research subjects. For example, it enables researchers to evaluate the Beijing Olympics' legacy more comprehensively, particularly when comparing the elite development legacy with other types, and the Olympic athlete development versus the professional athletes'. The findings of this study can provide evidence for assessing of the Chinese soccer administrative reform and judging how successful the soccer professionalization has been since 2015 from the elite development perspective. Beyond the academic significance, this study can yield implications for policymakers in the related fields on reconciling the policy conflicts between different elite development initiatives.

Literature Review

Incentives for Staging the Olympics

This paper seeks to investigate the impact of “Olympic Strategy” on the soccer professionalization in China at the policy level. This term refers to a pivotal point of the Chinese government’s priority in sporting affairs. To a large extent, this term originated from the nation’s (People’s Republic of China) involvement in the Olympic movement, mainly in the forms of bidding, hosting and legacy development, in addition to its participation in athletic competitions. Thus, it is necessary to understand the motives behind nations’ involvement in the sport mega-events, including the Olympic Games. One way to achieve this understanding is through the discussion of different types of interpreted or confirmed event-related outcomes for nations, communities and other stakeholders involved in various activities of staging the Olympic Games. The first part of this review will address the significance of the topic in the Olympic legacy sphere. In the end, the research draws forth the research questions based on the summary of the literature review.

In sport policy literature, such post-event impacts are usually presented in the concepts of legacy. Even though the term “legacy” does not intrinsically carry a semantic meaning of sport, but it has evolved into a dedicated term among the scholarly discussion of the event-caused consequences, especially since the increasing use of the term in the Olympic circle in the 1980s and 1990s (Cashman, 2002). As part of the efforts to reveal the causes and contexts of sport mega-events legacies, Chappelet (2012) claims that the emergence of this concept in sport management paralleled the inquiry of costs and

benefits of organizing mega-events from financial, economic, social, and environmental aspects. To anchor the consensus and controversies on a series of fundamental problems of legacy studies requires the acquisition of a big picture of this research field before delving into the discussion of any particular type of legacy. First, what kind of attributes are essential to Olympic legacy and its study? Second, what are the major ongoing and past trends in Olympic legacy? Third, how does the Olympic legacy relate to elite development and sport policy?

Attributes of Mega-events Legacy Study. Researchers agree that mega-events legacy is a complex concept. There is no guarantee to the legacy outcome being consistently positive. In creating a desired mega-event legacy, stakeholders endeavor and leverage efforts to produce maximum good and reduce bad output. Many scholars in legacy studies have identified the two-sided nature associated with the mega-event legacy. As Mangan (2008) suggests, the legacy is not inherently one-sided as whether its property is “benign or malign, advantageous or disadvantageous, intended or unintended” (p. 1869) is not always guaranteed. Girginov and Hills (2008), generating various commentaries on conceptualizing Olympic legacies, conclude that the Games could be “a source of negative development” (p. 2096). Furthermore, Mangan (2008) uses the Sydney Games as an example to demonstrate that perspective matters when discussing Olympic legacies. Specifically, he applies the financial concept of debt and asset to show the two-sided legacies in Sydney case: the positive legacy of the improved competitive experience for elite athletes, was listed in the asset column of the balance sheet. While the negative legacy, the shortfall in promoting grassroot participations, was also recorded

on the debt column. To generate consensus and better summarize the problem, Mangan quotes an investigation of stakeholder perspective on various legacies of the Sydney Games by Toohey (2008), in which the latter concludes that the elite sport in Australia has profited at the expense of sport for all. The two-sided nature of the complex mega-event legacy, which is evidenced in many past mega-events including the Olympics, requires organizers to address the concerns with several aspects of fulfilling the legacy visions such as governance and sustainability (Girginov & Hills, 2008).

The complexity of legacy outcome is not restricted to the uncertainty of good or bad, but also reflected in the diversity of outcome categories that are covered. Differences between these diverse categories can serve as basis for explaining why bidding and organizing committees emphasize certain legacy categories over others. Moreover, differences such as the long-term vs. short-term, tangible vs. intangible can benefit the understanding of the mechanisms of particular problems related to outcome measurement, sustainability, and beneficiaries. Many researches categorize different legacies based on various principles, which is a good starting point for assessing the differences and their consequent influences on the bidding and hosting activities (Cashman, 2002; Chappelet, 2012; Preuss, 2007; Gratton & Preuss, 2008). It is notable that instead of enumerating as many categories as possible, both Preuss (2007) and Chappelet (2012) raise the concept of “dimension” in order to differentiate legacy based on certain guideline. Specifically, Preuss (2007) proposes a “legacy cube” (p.211) model that features three dimensions: degree of planned, positive and quantifiable structure. While Chappelet and Junod (2006)’s “legacies matrix” pays attention to two other

dimensions in addition to tangibility: territorial and personal, sport-related and nonsport-related. Using the Innsbruck 1964 and 1976 Olympic Winter Games as examples, the matrix puts “Olympic village flats” into the territorial, tangible category, while categorizing “sport volunteerism spirit” as personal and intangible (Chappelet & Junod, 2006). Nevertheless, this review will focus on the category of legacies perceived as positive ones, given the assumption that potential advocates of hosting the Olympic Games attempt to justify the bidding actions based on benign outcomes (Agha et al., 2012).

Economic Legacy. Economic benefit is undeniably among the most persuasive rationale for bidding and hosting the sport mega-events. Multiple trends have given rise to the growing intention of using sporting event for economic development, which include but not limited to: growth of event industry and sport tourism, transformation from amateurism to full commercialization of Olympic Movement after the 1984 Los Angeles Games, pressure of justifying the escalating cost of hosting (Chalip & Leyns, 2002; Zimbalist, 2015). Despite promises of economic development presented in most bid books, research has shown the claimed economic benefits associated with the events are not evidently supported and that the methods of measurement, accuracy of estimation, or correctness of contribution are either faulty or problematic (Zimbalist, 2015). As Heinemann (2002) identifies, one of the barriers for economic impact analysis of the Olympic Games is the difficulty in distinguishing similar concepts, for example, “economic impact” and “long-term legacy” (p. 181). Likewise, Agha et al. (2012) acknowledge the hardship of clearly determining the long-term economic legacy effects.

This difficulty becomes potentially problematic to hosting nations as critics might use similar concepts that carry different meanings when evaluating the claimed economic benefits in the bid books.

Defining the long-term legacy is not the only segment in current economic impacts evaluations that suffers from inexact assessment. Zimbalist (2015) points out the methodological issues with the *ex-ante* approach of estimating cost and outcomes that are frequently adopted in promotional studies. For instance, in reality the condition in which multipliers generated by the input-output model were usually unmet thus results in significantly inflated estimated new economic output created. Similarly, in a study comparing two analytical methods in economic impacts of sporting event, Taks et al. (2011) suggest that the size of event being evaluated is decisive in the appropriateness of using an I-O modeling based Economic Impact Analysis. Both studies revealed a common flaw of existing economic impact measurements for mega-events of a size of the Olympic Games.

Urban Development Legacy. The modern Olympic Movement has taken place in urban settings since its inception. As a result, scholars have noted the role that the Games could play in the urbanization process (Oliver and Lauermann, 2017; Essex and Chalkey, 2002). Of specific interest is the influence of construction of new facilities, infrastructure improvements such as transportation, and other activities imposed by the events that happen in the urban setting. The types of event-induced activities that shape the urban development are diverse, so are the modes that mega-events influence such process. Based on a systematic review of urban studies, Oliver and Lauermann (2017)

identify three major event-led development models that differentiate each other in the framing of mega-events by bidders: as temporary catalyst for long-term development, embedded in governance strategy, and as policy experiments. They conclude that all these three models link “temporary projects to longer term development agendas through political framing narratives” (Oliver & Lauermann, 2017, p. 41). Many researchers consider the “acceleration effect” of mega-events indicated by the bidding plans that incorporate urban development into their goals to be one of the strongest motivations for pursuing the bid. For example, Essex and Chalkey (2002) point out that “the existence of a definite deadline to stage the event acts as an important stimulus to ‘fast-track’ development.” The importance of such effects was confirmed and updated in the discussion on mega-events as a temporary catalyst by Oliver and Lauermann (2017). They noted that “bid cities now regularly provide a statement indicating that the short-term deadlines of the Olympics will accelerate urban regeneration and stimulate regional economic development” as required by the IOC (Oliver & Lauermann, 2017, p. 30).

Facilities built for the use of mega-events are the most discussed focal point when media pay attention to the concept of legacy, especially in the Olympic Games (Siegfried & Zimbalist, 2006; Essex & Chalkey, 2002). On one hand, the important arenas that host the opening ceremonies or witness the classic moments of competition, are the most prominent icons during the event. Some of these facilities usually last significantly longer than other tangible legacies, such as souvenir, commercial, and printed matter. They also form a symbiotic relationship with other landmarks in urban settings. On the other hand, sustainability has been a priority for the IOC since the 1990s, and long-term legacy

planning grew into a necessity for sustainable development in the Olympic Movement. Since 2000s, the post-Games management of newly constructed and highly symbolic facilities is regarded not only as an intuitive reflection on the quality of hosting activities but also an indicator of prospect of future bidding. As an infamous example of “white elephant”, the Montreal Olympic Stadium, which has cost Montreal taxpayers 13 times of its estimate, still struggles to find a full-time tenant since the relocation of former Montreal Expos to Washington, D.C. Meanwhile, the previous financial failure with the Summer Olympics and the consequent management difficulties associated with the Olympic Stadium has made the city of Calgary extremely cautious of undertaking the financial risk of bidding for 2026 Winter Games (Strashin, 2017).

Political and Diplomatic Legacies. Fulfilling the political and diplomatic goals are usually referred as implicit messages compared to other development-through-sport benefits in the official bidding plan. Yet they have always been an explicit outcome that countries manage to achieve through involvement in sports. Of particular interest is the inclusion of political objectives when countries decide to deploy sport initiatives. In an article by Cha (2009), several arguments have considerable implications on the complex and dynamic characteristics of political purposes for countries’ bidding and hosting of mega-events. To establish a framework of thinking sport and politics, Cha (2009) maps out the practical connections between three core assumptions about how sport contributes to the aims of international relations study: nation-building, asserting independence, conformity and displaying soft power. The political objectives associated with hosting mega-events vary across hosting nations. Therefore, the consequent diplomatic

information that is purposefully crafted and conveyed to the world is also diverse accordingly. Among the scholars who acknowledge this idea, Murray and Pigman (2014) suggest that governments may use sport to demonstrate superiority ranging from “athletic prowess to the ideology of a particular system of state” (p. 1100).

However, the intersection of sport and politics does not always guarantee positive outcomes, especially where conflicting ideologies clash. Deos (2011) also reveals a dualistic tendency of researchers on sport-for-diplomacy phenomenon. On one hand some researchers identify sport as serving “to build relationships with foreign publics by building bridges across rifts of difference” (p. 1170), but on the other hand some contend the potential benefits of mixing sport and diplomacy to be problematic. Instead of arguing for one side against the other, Deos (2011) recognizes a “gap in sports-diplomacy research creates obstacles for assessing the validity of either of the above arguments” (p.1171). Using a rather positive example, Cha (2009), in his remarks, addresses how Australia used sport, especially by being a high standard host of multiple global sport events, to improve its international prestige and showcase soft power. The downside of politics-fueled sport field, however, sometimes presents itself as the sport values helplessly sacrifice to political interests. For example, Huang and Wang (2013) discuss the series of conflicts over the name issue of the Republic of China, and the People’s Republic of China in the IOC. Due to the loss of legitimate representative of China in United Nations and consequently many other international organizations including the IOC, the Olympic committee under Taiwan regime chose to withdraw its athletes from the Olympic competitions globally in protesting the pressure exerted by People’s

Republic of China, who maintains “One China Policy” and the use of “Chinese Taipei” rather than Republic of China. As a result, the participation opportunities of Taiwanese athletes and mainland Chinese athletes at the highest level became the ultimate scapegoat of unresolved confrontation between the two governments during the stalemate period (Huang & Wang, 2013). In the 1976 Montreal Games, due to the conflicting political standpoints of China and Taiwan government, the Taiwanese athletes were withdrawal from the competition. Huang and Wang (2013) consider both the IOC and the ROCOC (the Olympic Committee of Taiwan) as losers in this incident, because of the unsettled name issue and failure to prevent political intervention.

The aforementioned characteristics post both opportunities and threats for governments seeking political benefits and diplomatic goals through sport. It is historically evident that neither the political and diplomatic goals pursued, nor the methods selected by nations in mega-events were never singular or limited but contains variability. This variability yields massive compatibility with nations of different economic or geographical status, culture, and regime, as well as room for strategic planning and implementation. Particularly, the benefits of hosting mega-event are among one of the compelling reasons for choosing sport over other means of diplomacy tools. Large and diverse audience base, and connections with positive sporting values can be constructive in improving the global image of hosting nations.

Aiming at Sport Development. The above review, which seeks to elucidate that various benefits constitute a massive part of motives for hosting the Olympics and other mega-events, has been mainly focused on the non sport-related category. Not only so, it

is self-evident that sport itself could also potentially benefit from the events. In discussing the Olympic Games legacy as intended development, Girginov and Hills (2008) present the historical link between the activities of hosting the Olympics and developing sport. The authors trace back to the inception of modern Olympic games, which supports the argument that the Olympic Movement inherently carries a mission of developing sport and facilitating participation. As one of the many intended development goals, the sport development is intrinsically connected with the modern Olympic movement in that its current visions resonate with Coubertin's ideal of countering the negative effect of capitalism and material culture on fitness (Girginov & Hills, 2008). On the other hand, several contradictions between the sport development vision and the current operation and commercial practice of IOC emerged as the Games develop economically and started to encounter sustainability crisis. An important argument on the scale of sport participation as an Olympic legacy is that it is "microtargets" instead of the claimed macrolevel, and is concerned with the specificity of groups, communities and activities (Girginov & Hills, 2008).

From a standpoint of competition, the happening of global sport competition at the elite level alone can produce considerable positive outcomes for the involved sport programs: possible advancement of human limits including world and Olympic records, test of cutting-edge theories and technologies in sport science and coaching, exposure of unestablished sports and the inclusion in Olympic programs (Kidd, 2013). Besides the benefits directly generated on the elite field, organizers of past Games have exerted substantial efforts to further sport-for-all programs (Weed et al., 2012). From a general

population standpoint, project of promoting physical activity involvement, improvement of sport facilities, government initiative for better policy support, are the major factors leading to the welfare of mass participation, especially at the grassroots level (Kidd, 2013). In analyzing the global sporting legacy of the Olympic Movement, Kidd (2013) identifies the distinctive impact of the decisions that determine the Olympic Program on the global advancement of sport. The inclusion and exclusion of certain programs have enormous influence on the participating populations. For example, Taekwondo made its first debut as a demonstration sport in the 1988 Olympics and was introduced as a formal program in 2000 Sydney Games. It is believed that such inclusion “may have broadened its exposure to younger athletes (Kazemi et al., 2006).” Therefore, it is suggested that the Olympic Movement should continue its expansion to include more sport programs, while staging them “more effectively and less expensively” (Kidd, 2013, p. 495). While admitting the power of television in spreading the influence of Olympic sports, Kidd raises questions about the possibility of using television to promote broad sport development and the greater role for NOCs to play in enhancing sport for all.

According to Shilbury et al. (2008), “participation and promoting the opportunities and benefits of participation” (p. 217) is the core of sport development. Therefore, many studies pay attention to the increase of participation in physical activities as one major indicator of achievement in sport development. Particularly, researchers apply wide range of methods to assess the claimed physical activity legacy of the London Games. Mahtani et al., (2013) conduct an overview of systematic reviews on direct evidences and indirect signs that support the existence of post-Games increase in

physical or sporting activities. The major motive for conducting such a review stemmed from the identification of a contradiction between the official justification for bidding and hosting the 2012 London Games, and the research showing a decline of sport participation among youth population during the same period. Of all the 844 citations identified, only two meet the criteria of this search, which are considered as having clear-stated study objectives and fitting the remit of the review. However, both demonstrate weak and inconclusive evidences in supporting the theory of increasing physical or sport activities after the Olympic Games. In addition to the review finding, the authors also propose several factors that can potentially facilitate the participation increase effect (Mahtani et al., 2013). For example, the cultivation of positive perception before the Games, and the notion of physical activity participation that is not exclusive to elite athletes. The appraisal of these highlighted factors is significant to the assessment of the contradiction between developing grassroot and elite sport from hosting mega-events as they put policy emphasis on different populations and usually associate with the level of public satisfaction towards the Games.

Despite the lack of evidence that Olympic Games led to an increased physical activity level, other scholars explore the processes that possibly facilitate the production of physical activity legacy from a policy perspective. By systematically reviewing the previous research with a policy-led aim, the article by Weed et al. (2012) draws on two themes that are decisive for delivering a physical activity legacy: engagement and perception, and “festival effect” and community. Extracted from several studies, the idea of engagement explains a correlation between negative perceptions of communities about

the Games and a reduced maneuverability on desired legacy outcome. Moreover, they point out a physical activity participation benefit among the most inactive adults from promoting the 2012 London Games as a national festival (Weed et al., 2012). It is also crucial to highlight the distinction between providing sport and physical activity opportunity as in many other studies such distinction is either ignored or too vague. These findings echo with the Mahtani et al (2013) article in that both studies draw attention to the specificity in promoting physical activity legacy as opposed to other sport-related objectives such as elite development.

Within the sport development legacy created by Olympic Games, the distinction between elite and grassroots has been a frequently mentioned theme in the legacy research, covering a wide variety of issues: public policy making, developing athletes, etc. (Green, 2007; Hong et al., 2005; Feng & Hong, 2013). On a broader scale, the decision to prioritize either path can evolve into substantial policy conflict. There have been cases when such policy conflict elevated to the level of long-term national sport policy priority, due to many external restrictions such as limited government budget, economic status at macro level, and even cultural and historical contexts (Green, 2007; Tan & Bairner, 2010; Tan & Houlihan, 2013). Green (2007), for instance, examines the how sport policy priorities in UK, Canada, and Australia transformed from 1960 to 2006. This research draws attention to the tendency of broader, more democratic social goals e.g. improving physical activity participation to give way to performance outcome in the western countries studied by the author under the pressure of achieving international sporting success. In other words, different sport systems have faced similar dilemma at

the highest level of policy making, balancing between elite sport and mass participation development. At the same time, Green (2007) presents large amount of policy changes along with the interviews to show how federal government increased support for elite development at the cost of sacrificing grassroots participation.

By focusing on the significant turning points of national sport policy priorities, Green's method appears instructive for the analysis of policy for soccer professionalization in China under the impact of Olympic strategy. Hong et al. (2005) conduct an analysis of the Chinese elite sports system through the formation of its overarching policy: the Olympic Strategy. The finding is significant in that it explains the central role of the Olympic Strategy in the Chinese elite sports system. Specifically, a preview of the Strategy for the 2008 Games was conducted from multiple perspectives, ranging from Olympic sports selection, training Olympic athletes to increasing resource. The authors special attention to the athletes' selection and training system by elaborating details on the youth development system under the scheme of state-sponsored sports. The article concluded itself by indicating the unpromising future of the "whole country support system" after the Beijing Olympics. The conclusion is based on possibilities of dissolution of the GAS's subsidiaries, decreasing government investment in elite sport, and cool down of Olympic medal enthusiasm (Hong et al., 2005).

However, most of the factors that contributed to the formation of the Olympic strategy according to the authors are supported by data from official sources thus lack objectivity. Especially, there is little theoretical ground or validated causal relation in supporting the claimed causes of "Olympic medal fever" (p. 526), which makes the

arguments prone to conjectures. Finally, the authors' speculation of the recession of the elite sports system is too assertive as it is for the most part hypothetical.

Bifurcated Elite Development: Olympic vs. Professional Sports in China

Instead of viewing it as one of various legacies of the Olympic Games, most scholarship in this area approaches the development of elite sports from the perspective of how countries use it as a systematic driving force to achieve long-lasting international success (De Bosscher et al., 2006). The findings and theories generated by these studies establish theoretical connections between the Olympic and other mega-events legacy, and the elite sport policy. The connection between this approach and the earlier discussion on “legacy as motive” of hosting the Olympics can be explained by a theoretical cycle of enhancement:

1. Sports policy factors at the meso-level can influence long-term performance and consequently determine elite sporting success (De Bosscher et al., 2006).
2. Despite the ongoing debates, there are qualitative and quantitative evidence that support the “demonstration effect” might help facilitate the Olympic legacy, e.g. sport participation with the leverage strategies in place, especially when there is either or both of local event hosting or local elite success (Weed et al., 2015).
3. Sport development legacy is an important category of various Olympic legacies, which includes the development of Olympic and professional athletes (Green, 2004).

However, the discrepancy of program settings, rules of play, training cycle and national team recruiting between the Olympic Games and the professional competitions requires practitioners to adopt different schemes in developing elites. Researchers in the policy study make remark on how this discrepancy implies to policy development. Green (2004) pays attention to a particular group of subjects that the term “elite sport” concerns. When discussing the broad national policy shifts in sport development, he draws a distinct line between the sector of Olympic sports and World Championships, and that of “fully professional” sports. In this regard, an efficient national sport administration which sets its highest priority as success in the Olympics will manage to maximize its athletic performance in the Olympic competition. Meanwhile, the efforts on producing elite level athletes who mainly play in professional competitions but have less presence or competitive advantage in Olympic competition will be considerably reduced. Eventually, a pair of conflicting interests arises within the elite development between the two groups with different goals in terms of developing athletes.

One might argue that the consequent conflict of interests does not necessarily prevent the national sport policies from addressing concerns with both sides of athlete development in a balanced manner. However, it becomes problematic when the Olympic Games play a role in influencing certain policy that prioritizes either development pathway over the other. From a perspective of governance of the Olympic legacy, this is inevitably a policy dilemma between cultivating Olympic success and pursuing the integrity in developing sport development legacy (Girginov & Hills, 2009). From the standpoint of actors in professional sports, their interests in elite development is

undoubtedly jeopardized when national policy favors the non-professional, Olympic component of sport development legacy, which could appear antagonistic and even potentially offset the efforts produced by policy that directs the professionalization of certain sports in the long run. As an archetypal manifestation of this problem, the soccer professionalization in China under the impact of the Olympic Strategy might be a case that facilitate the understanding of the policy impact identified in the research question. This paper will not proceed into the details of the origin or development of the Olympic Strategy, because plenty of studies have summarized its evolvement and identified some characteristics of the Chinese elite sport system that surround this issue (Hong et al., 2005; Dong & Mangan, 2008; Tan & Green, 2008; Fan & Lu, 2013; Zheng & Chen, 2016; Hu & Henry, 2017).

Soccer Professionalization in China

Due the domestic nature of the research topic and its corresponding constraints on research conditions, most scholars who examines this subject are from Chinese language background. The soccer professionalization in China is a contemporary issue for its comparatively brief history. Many Chinese sport historians and commentators acknowledge the professionalization did not officially start until the Red Mountain Valley Conference in 1992, in which the representatives from around the country attended the conference and discussed the reform of Chinese soccer (Fan & Lu, 2013). The soccer governance model under the Chinese state sponsored sport system exert substantial difficulty on the study of its policy, mainly at the level of source accessibility and data collection restriction (Tan & Bairner, 2010). In conducting interviews with the

sport officials in GAS and CFA, Tan and Bairner (2010) mentioned the interviewees' perseverance on holding back their "real opinions" when a digital recorder was present, given the political sensitivity of their government related identities. Lack of the historical foundation and the barriers of language and source contributed to the paucity of literature in English domain.

However, by reviewing existing literatures on the soccer professionalization and the coeval general reform of sport system, Tan and Bairner (2010) has identified that some characteristics shown in this period converge with the previous discussion on the conflicting interests between developing Olympic and professional elite athletes, which later lead to the formation of research questions. At the same time, several studies indicated the value of policy documents as valid research subjects for interpreting the construction of key concepts in research questions such as "elite development", "Olympic Strategy" and "professionalization", especially in the Chinese context (Tan & Bairner, 2010; Hu & Henry, 2017).

Fan and Lu (2013) provide a historical synthesis of the professionalization process of Chinese football from 1993 to 2013. They confine their scope on the rise and fall of the professional league in the commercialization era. In addition to introducing the reform efforts of Chinese football by placing it in a larger economic and social context, the authors paid attention to several significant factors that account for the downsides of the professionalization, such as proliferated match fixing, low quality of play and excessive administrative interference. Although the authors acknowledged the soccer's pioneering role in initiating the overall transformation of the elite sport system from

state-sponsored toward market economy model, they also pointed out that the NGB's lack of autonomy and tight government control need changes to furthering the reform to "the most fundamental part of elite sport system (Fan & Lu, 2013)." Specifically, soccer became the first sport that has a professional league system in China and began its reform as early as in 1992. Meanwhile, according to the authors, compared to fully established professional soccer systems in Western countries, Chinese soccer reform was still incomplete to a large extent. One of the sign was the CFA's tie with the government sport department and its non-autonomous status (Fan & Lu, 2013).

This research allows readers to easily locate the major historical events for Chinese football professionalization during this era. Furthermore, it revealed a few China-specific issues that are potentially influential to the professionalization process regarding the elite sport system as well as social and economic backgrounds. First, it brings up the connections between the failure of China national and Olympic soccer team in international stages and the reformative motivation. Secondly, it adopts a policy scope in analyzing the on-going problems in the professionalization. Finally, it mentions the insufficiency of the reform in improving the level of youth development towards elite level. For the unsatisfactory youth development condition, the authors attribute to a series of factors including pressure of getting promotion in a short period, relatively long cycle of getting youth development outcome, and short-sightedness to economic benefits brought by developed players (Fan & Lu, 2013).

In a chronological structured, panoramic account of soccer professionalization, the shifting status and interests of clubs is merely one of many characteristics. Liang

(2013) takes a departure from such approach, as he empirically showed the shift of multi-relationships of clubs with the CFA, players and fans through stakeholder analysis. By restricting the perspective to the clubs', the author provides an in-depth analysis of how governance power in soccer shifted during the professionalization process and proposes an "inclusive approach" of recognizing all the stakeholders in a club's business. He also calls for a more pervasive understanding of "professionalism" to reduce the unnecessary policy conflicts (Liang, 2013).

Liang's findings highlight the increased power of negotiation and involvement of clubs in the decision-making structure in the new professionalization era. He also points out the inadequacy of administrative reform, as the governing body still maintains the ultimate control over certain issues. Specifically, the author elaborates on the clubs' struggle by examining the "G-7 Revolution" (Liang, 2013, p. 438), a case in which seven influential clubs sought to challenge the supremacy of the CFA in discipline sanctions and elevated to an outcry for deeper reform of the Chinese soccer system. More importantly, the analysis pays attention to the effort from the CFA in transforming the youth development model from old provincial school-based to new club-led academy based, suggesting a potential divergence of elite development goals between state-sponsored and private sport sectors. However, the article only furthers the discussion on the insufficiency of new club academy model in balancing training and education for young players compared to the old government-funded model. Apart from extrapolating the negative effect on attracting youngsters into playing soccer, the author did not relate this change in youth development to a larger elite development policy context due to the

narrow but focused research perspective. Obviously, to understanding the relation between the state-level sport policy and the soccer professionalization in terms of developing elite athletes, filling this literature gap becomes necessary.

Tan and Bairner (2010) go a few steps farther in mapping such relationship as they explored the role of the state in China's globalization in the field of sport. They offer policy insights to the study of professionalization of soccer in China as through the exploration of the extent and the ways that Chinese government plays in sport globalization through the case of developing elite soccer. Thanks to the access to a wide variety of official documents and the interviews conducted with senior Chinese sport administrators, the authors are able to obtain an in-depth view of both the perceived roles of state in the globalization process according to the interviewees, and the specific policy provisions associated with the corresponding perceptions.

Among all the findings, it is notable that the authors asserted that the top priority for the interventions on various professional soccer policies was to serve the national team. Meanwhile, the performance pressure in the 2008 Games also played a role, which resonated with one of the major premises of the research topic: the Olympic strategy has imposed strong influences in shaping the policies of professional football. The authors' argument was supported by the Chinese government's intent to "take advantage of the introduction of global football resources to facilitate its elite football development" (Tan & Bairner, 2010, p. 591).

By focusing on the attitudes of stakeholders in specific policies, this article has multiple perspectives to facilitate the understanding of the power structure of Chinese

professional soccer. Like many articles on the sport administrative structure of China, it highlighted the unique subordinate relationship between government and national governing body of football, specifically the “2-in-1” agencies setting. This setting refers to the frequently mentioned organization concept of the Chinese soccer system, that the governing body of soccer in China bears the title “Soccer Management Center,” a direct subordinate of the GAS that is responsible for domestic regulations. At the same time, it also uses the title “Chinese Football Association” when dealing with international and non-governmental issues. Apart from the economic control on the league, the authors also demonstrated the absolute power of the CFA on calling up players from clubs to national teams without compensation. One important implication was the interference from national level performance on professional club competitions: “the attitude of the Chinese government towards the transfer of Chinese footballers was directly linked to the issue of Team China’s international performance” (Tan and Bairner, 2010).

Summary

Scholars have made progress in addressing the problems related to elite development that emerged from soccer professionalization in China. These problems are associated with the national sport policy regarding elite development, which is considered as part of the sport development legacy of the Olympic Games. Theoretically, past study identified the increasing yet unsatisfying decision-making power among clubs on elite development issue at the policy level. This condition was recognized as a character in the era of soccer professionalization (Fan & Lu, 2013). As professional soccer experienced the change of development model from state-sponsored to market-oriented during the

reform, club perspective stakeholder analysis raised concern in the potentially conflicting interests between clubs and national sport administration over youth player development and national team recruitment (Liang, 2013). Moreover, examining specific professional soccer policy such as youth player and transfer regulations elicited information of the perceived role of the Chinese government in sport globalization (Tan & Bairner, 2010). But few researchers have systematically studied how national-level elite development policies might contribute to this adverse situation in professional soccer, let alone elaborating the discussions on the conflict with the Olympic Strategy at elite development level.

On the other hand, through decades of involvement in elite sport, especially the Olympics, Chinese sports system's creation and reinforcement of the "Olympic Strategy" qualifies as an example of sport development legacy, especially to the part of elite development. The strategy prioritizes the interests of developing Olympic athletes at the elite level (Feng & Hong, 2010). Meanwhile, soccer professionalization in China is characterized by increased competency and improved status of private actors, namely clubs. Technically, soccer policies should embody such tendency by prioritizing the development of professional soccer players, which was not the real case. Therefore, prioritizing the interests of developing Olympic athletes under China's national sport policy is believed to conflict with developing non-Olympic, professional soccer players under the prospects of soccer professionalization policies. In particular, a series of regulations by CFA on U23 players since last year has generated intense controversies for improperly dealing such conflicts. However, knowledge of how such policy conflict

arises or works has little presence neither in the literature of Chinese national sport policy nor professional soccer. Due to the immediacy of the U23 regulations, there has been little scholarly publication on this phenomenon either thus resulting a literature gap.

Method

Research Questions

This research examines the central question: how does the Olympic Strategy impact soccer professionalization in China? This central question can be subdivided into the following key questions that inform the data collection and analysis. Prioritizing the development of Olympic athletes is multi-dimensional and is reflected by how the importance of developing Olympic athletes was framed in policy documents. This raises the following questions: How do the elite sport policy documents related to the Olympic Strategy frame the significance of developing Olympic athletes over others?

Understanding the impact referred in the central question require the researcher to examine its source in state-level policymaking. It also requires the assessment of the other end: the policies related to elite development in Chinese professional soccer. Due to the 23-year-old age restriction implemented since 1992 in the Olympic competition, policies regarding the registration, eligibility and playing time of U23 players become the focusing case if the researcher want to validate the impact. In this research context, the U23 soccer players in China are a special group of athletes, because many of which bear the identities of Olympic and professional athletes at the same time. Therefore, the researcher would explore the rationale behind the CFA's recent regulations on the U23 players to reveal whether professional soccer policies have inherited the idea of prioritization in the Olympic Strategy.

Research Methodology

In this study, the researcher collected and analyzed 24 Chinese sport policy documents qualitatively to reveal the ways of constructing meanings and rationales: the framing patterns of the importance of developing Olympic athletes that exist in documents that are salient to the Olympic Strategy; the rationales of regulating the development of professional soccer players at elite level. By answering the research questions, the analysis will serve as the basis of understanding the conflict between prioritizing the interest of Olympic success and fulfilling the goals of soccer professionalization in terms of elite development.

Three theories constitute the theoretical framework that guides the methodological design of this research. De Bosscher et al. (2006) propose SPLISS, a conceptual framework for analyzing sport policy factors leading to international sporting success, with one of its premises being that sports policy factors at the meso-level can influence long-term performance and consequently determine elite sporting success. Meanwhile, based on an intuitive belief, the demonstration effect specifies that that watching or experiencing elite sport performances or events inspires people to actively participate in sport themselves (Hindson, Gidlow, & Peebles, 1994; Hogan & Norton, 2000). Despite the ongoing debates over its limitations and empirical validity, there is qualitative and quantitative evidence that supports the demonstration effect (Hindson et al., 1994). Specifically, the effect might help facilitate specific Olympic legacy e.g., sport participation with leveraging strategies in place, especially when there is either or both of local event hosting or local elite success (Weed et al., 2015). It is also noteworthy of the fact that the literature review elucidates the inclusion relationship between sport

development legacy and professional development. The theories generated by these studies establish theoretical connections between the Olympic and other mega-events legacy, and the elite sport policy.

Following sections will explain in details of how philosophical perspective actively affects the design of research methods, as well as how the researcher collects and analyzes data. Explanation of these procedures can systematically justify the use of present method, and as records of how reviewing previous literatures and developing research question have determined the construction of inquiry.

Philosophical Perspective

In a hierarchical structure of research, philosophical assumptions inform research at the broadest level (Creswell, 2016). The philosophy that shapes this study is constructivism. Several factors consist of the rationale for adopting the constructivist approach as research method for this study. Subjectively, my personal philosophical perspective, which was built on individual experience as a soccer enthusiast and a sport management student, determines the key assumptions on approaching this research question. Combined with the understanding of the significance and the theoretical situation of this topic, these impulses gradually develop into the research goals that this study attempts to achieve.

Constructivists see meaning making as an activity of the individual mind and acknowledge that individuals create knowledge differently. Because a multiplicity of views exists, researchers must investigate this and what contributes to its construction, while making explicit their own values. Therefore, this constructivist approach requires

the use of an advocacy theory in this qualitative research as there exist an unfulfilling situation that needs changes in the studied issue based on the researcher's beliefs. Methodologically, an advocacy theory leads to the formation of the aforementioned research questions, which seek to understand the ways that different actors address their corresponding interests in this unfulfilling situation. The use of document analysis, a process of examining and interpreting data in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge, also reflects the constructivist-oriented research methodology as it is a process of inductively constructing codes and themes out of different actors' perspectives (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

When elaborating on the specifics of the central issues, it is beneficial for explaining the reasons of adopting the constructivism philosophy to discuss each major elements of the philosophy. To begin with, both the nature of national sport policy development and the characteristics of soccer professionalization in China encourage an ontological position that is inclined to relativism rather than realism. Taking the policy documents as an example, as research objects, they largely differ from the what quantitative researches tend to study, especially those "hard facts" and objects that are independent of human interpretation. Rather, documents are considered by scholars as "social facts," which are produced, shared, and used in socially organised ways (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997). As social organization is transformed, the respective thoughts within the policy documents are subject to change as well. In an article analyzing the discourse of key stakeholders of Chinese elite sport, Hu and Henry (2016) demonstrate how the

nature and significance of the Olympic Games have changed by focusing on the policy documents during the era of first successful Olympic bid to the Post-Beijing Games.

The rationale for adopting the scope of constructivism is also supported by the epistemological relation between the subject and object that are identified in the studied domain. Based on the continuum by Crotty (1998), it is suggested that an epistemology position in between constructionist and subjectivist should be favored in approaching this particular topic. Specifically, the “object” in this case can refer to data, that is, the actual texts in the policy documents that are collected. However, if an objectivist researcher decides to acquire knowledge merely from these texts while keeping their “subjects” uninvolved in the research design, it is unlikely that he or she can reach genuine understanding of the salient essence of the data besides linguistic or superficial meanings. That is because the truth that we intend to extract from the data - how actors interpret certain values differently, is not at all independent of human activity or social construction, but in fact highly dependent on social, cultural and historical contexts. According to the constructionist epistemology, one must take into account certain amount of knowledge created through human mind’s engagement with realities (Crotty, 1998). For example, understanding of the socio-economic history of China in late 20th century is a premise of making senses of how the establishment of socialist market economy played a role in framing the importance of developing Olympic athletes. Based on the beliefs of subjectivist, the open-ended nature of the research questions, along with the multi-perspective of actors involved, suggest that it is much more constructive to learn the variety of ways to perceive realities than striving for an absolute, singular truth. For

example, a senior official in the General Administration of Sport is supposed to infer the impact of “Olympic Strategy as the highest priority” differently from a shareholder of professional soccer club on their corresponding responsibilities in terms of developing elite athletes, due to some conflicting interests.

Data Collection

Year	Document Title	Issue Organization
1984	The Central Committee of the CPC (Communist Party of China)’s Announcement on the Further Development of Sport	The Central Committee of the CPC
1993	The SPCSC (State Physical Culture and Sport Committee)’s Opinion on Deepening the Reform of Sport System	The State Physical Culture and Sport Committee
1994-2000	The Summary of the Olympic Glory Plan	The State Physical Culture and Sport Committee
1995	The Summary of the Nationwide Fitness Plan	The State Physical Culture and Sport Committee
1996	The SPCSC’s Opinion on Implementing the Strategy of Revitalizing Country by Science and Education, Accelerating the Progress of Sport Science Development	The State Physical Culture and Sport Committee
1997	The SPCSC’s Temporary Provision on the Regulations of the Centers of Sport Programs Management	The State Physical Culture and Sport Committee
2001-2000	The Summary of the Sport Reform and Development	The General Administration of Sport

Table 1: Lists of Policy Documents Collected

2001-2000	The Summary of the Olympic Glory Plan	The General Administration of Sport
2002	The Central Committee of the CPC and the State Council's Guidelines for Further Strengthening and Improving Sporting Affairs in the New Era	The Central Committee of the CPC; The State Council
2010	The General Office of the State Council's Guideline on Accelerating the Development of Sport Industry	The General Office of the State Council
2011	The 12th Five-Year Plan on the Development of Sporting Affairs	The General Administration of Sport
2011-2020	The Summary of the Olympic Glory Plan	The General Administration of Sport
2013	The General Administration of Sport, the Ministry of Education's Guidelines for Enhancing the School Football Affairs	The General Administration of Sport; The Ministry of Education
2015	The Adjustment and Reform Plan of the CFA	The Chinese Football Association
2015	The Overall Reform and Development Plan of Chinese Football	The Chinese Football Association
2016	The Rules and Regulations of the CFA	The Chinese Football Association
2016	The 13th Five-Year Plan on the Elite Sport	The General Administration of Sport
2016-2050	The Mid-to Long-Term Development Plan of Chinese Football	The Chinese Football Association
2017	The 2020 Action Plan of the CFA	The Chinese Football Association

Table 1

2017	The CFA's Announcement on Normalizing the Management of Professional Clubs	The Chinese Football Association
2017	The Working Plan of Reform and Development Experiment of Chinese Football	The Chinese Football Association
2017	The CFA's Implementation Guidelines for Imposing Adjustment Fee on Players in 2017 Summer Transfer Window	The Chinese Football Association
2017	The CFA's Announcement on Revising the Appearance Policies of U23 Players in CSL (Chinese Super League) and CL (China League)	The Chinese Football Association

Table 1

The use of qualitative research methods has a compelling reason that worth mentioning. The nature of the research questions involves a process of understanding, or interpretation of certain profound meaning to the topic. In this case, the inquiry of how government and sport administration actors frame the significance of prioritizing the development of Olympic athletes over professionals, was open-ended, complex and exploratory. Therefore, it required the researcher to deploy a method that take into consideration the aforementioned actors' views, contexts and settings. Previous studies that investigated related topics also prove the value of public policy documents (Hu & Henry, 2016; Hu & Henry, 2017; Tan & Bairner, 2010; Fan & Lu, 2013). Since they contain the words and language of the participants, qualitative design that involves with document analysis allows researchers to obtain more information compared to method that examines narrow-focused variable.

Data collection in this research looked for open-to-public, policy documents issued by Chinese government departments and national sport governing body that were

available online. Although the research topic deals with a case taking place in China, there is no tangible research site in the traditional sense, such as a community or social space. Instead, the closest definition that is equivalent to the research site, which specifies the place that the study takes place, is the artificial “policy space” according to Wildawsky (1979). The researcher developed a protocol for gathering salient policy documents from online database, digital archives and government websites. The sub-research questions were used to guide the document gathering process.

Since the Olympic Strategy is defined as a national-level elite sport policy, the researcher limited the searching only to policy documents issued by departments directly under the Chinese government, authority and national governing bodies. Specifically, the producers of the policy documents that were gathered for this study include: the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, which is the party’s “highest organ of authority”; the State Physical Culture and Sport Committee - the former government agency that oversaw all the sporting affairs in China; the State Council - the chief administrative authority of China; the General Administration of Sports - the present government agency responsible for sporting affairs; and the Chinese Football Association - the governing body of soccer in China. All the documents collected are accessible to the public in digital formats. The researcher retrieved the documents from various official websites of all the government agencies and governing bodies. For example, the document *2011-2020 The Summary of the Olympic Glory Plan* was made available in Chinese version by the sport information center of the GAS on its official website: <http://www.sport.gov.cn/> It was categorized under the directory “GAS government

affairs, Special Issue”. The page specifies useful information including the date of issue, document producer, copyright, etc.

Informed by Bowen (2009), the relevance of contents to the research problem and general properties like original purpose and completeness are the primary indicators of whether certain document should be included into research. For example, *The Sport Law of The PRC in 1995* was excluded from the gathering results, because despite being very comprehensive and balanced on addressing every aspect of sporting affairs that are subject to the administration of justice, it failed to provide in-depth information about elite development. Appraisal like this also benefit the early stage of data analysis process, especially the steps of reading through the data and taking descriptive and reflective notes. By reviewing the documents holistically prior to data analysis, the research was able to expose the commonalities, differences, idiosyncrasies and biases related to the central phenomenon in the documents.

Data Analysis

The research sub-questions guided the entire document analysis process. To elucidate how the researcher reached the results, it is necessary to explain thoroughly the specific methods applied on analyzing the policy documents collected. An inductive approach is the essence of the document analysis in this study as the researcher attempted to condense the data and develop themes that are useful for answering the research questions.

Because of the epistemological nature of this inquiry, the corresponding coding methods consist of descriptive, process, and themeing coding (Saldana, 2013).

Descriptive coding is instrumental in associating the raw data with diverse topics as most of the elite sport policy documents deals with a wide array of social topics, varying from the Olympic Games to sport commercialization. Assigning topics to texts helps build categories and filter excessive data. Process coding, on the other hand, is crucial for capturing the actions mentioned in the data. In policy documents, government and sport authorities usually propose massive amount of advocating actions to be implemented, as well as descriptive actions that are evaluated in an ex-post manner. To record these actions becomes requisite if one wants to understand certain actors' attitudes and rhetoric in a phenomenon. When it comes to the texts that contain no explicit action or action too abstract to associate with a concrete topic, themeing coding possesses an advantage in bridging the elusive meanings within such texts and the "anchor labels".

Before the coding process, some preparation works was needed to make all the tools and sources for coding available. The researcher first read through all the data through the scope of guiding research questions to generate a rough idea of what salient information was available. During the reading, the researcher took two types of notes: descriptive notes that illustrated what contents were observed, and reflective notes that express how the reader feels. For example, when reading *The SPCSC's Temporary Provision on the Regulations of the Centers of Sport Programs Management*, notes taken include "the centers should establish transfer policies", "very balanced in covering every aspect of details." By taking notes when reading the data, a rudimentary map of research question related information emerged for all of the data, which significantly increased the efficiency of the following coding process. At the same time, the research created labels

for the concepts in research questions that had appeared in the data. For instance, labels of concepts like “professionalization”, “Olympic Strategy”, “elite sport” and “elite athletes development” were given to the established research questions. Later, these labels were used as keywords to search and locate particular section of data in the first cycle of coding.

The coding process consist of two cycles of coding. In the first cycle of coding, three coding methods, descriptive, process and themeing coding were used hybridly to produce codes for each document. All the coded texts were translated into English immediately after this cycle and organized into numbered lists. In the second cycle of coding, the researcher examined all the existing codes and determined whether to add or delete, expand or merge certain codes. Codes started to form small and narrow categories in this step. After the second cycle, broader categories that usually comprise multiple highly-related codes were constructed. Finally, broad code categories were analyzed and shrunk into a number of themes that are capable of addressing the research questions, in other words, the framing patterns and rationales.

Microsoft Word 2016 was adopted as a sufficient software for the coding process. It allows researcher to display all the raw data texts, and search, highlight, comment, and label section of any length from single word to paragraph. The first cycle of coding was conducted on the original texts while separate Word documents recorded the codes extracted from the original texts.

First Cycle. The researcher began the first cycle of coding in the following steps. First, previous labels created from research questions were used as keywords to search

the data exhaustively one at a time. The researcher examined all the search results and determined which result became the code to be included into a separate numbered list. If a certain section of texts is deemed significant and relevant, the researcher would copy and paste it to the code list, while also select and use the “comment” function of the software to number it. Not all of the search results qualified as codes. For example, in coding *2011-2020 The Summary of the Olympic Glory Plan*, the phrase “the Olympics...has become the international platform of communication, competition and cooperation” was left out because although it contains keyword “Olympics”, its relevance with the elite sport development was too indistinct. Having searched for all the keywords and made decisions on each code, the first cycle yielded roughly 30 codes for each document on average. The codes are partially in vivo as their contents were strongly relevant and contain keywords in original texts. Codes generated in this cycle were short phrases and sentences taken from original texts that bear keywords from research questions.

Second Cycle. The core of this cycle was the consolidation of the codes produced in the first cycle. The consolidation featured a bottom-up approach that sought to further distill the codes and form small categories. Having the list of all the codes, the researcher categorized them, at the same time checked for overlapping and omitted ones and decided to emerge or add. For example, the codes “overall goal setting”, “numerical and ranking goals”, and “optimizing and rationalizing the mobilization of athletes” formed a single small category, which was assigned the label “goal setting”. In the meantime, codes like “performance ranking in summer Olympics” and “performance ranking in winter

Olympics” were merged into “ranking” (under the category of “performance goals”) as they appeared redundant. By repeating this process, the number of codes were adjusted and reduced to around 10 to 15 small categories. Small code categories from this cycle were subheadings equivalent to the bullet points or paragraph topics from the documents.

Develop Themes. With the small code categories in place, the next step was to construct broader categories that could be developed into themes. The researcher referred to two principles in proceeding from small to broad code categories: the common structure of the data, which informs how the evaluations, facts, objectives, advocacies were organized in the policy documents; and the ways that the research questions correspond to the specifics from the data, e.g. what specific and complete example from the documents qualifies as a framing pattern or rationale? Compared to the fragmented and specific codes in the small categories, codes of broad categories were fewer in number, usually no more than 10 for each document, but more generalized.

Code	Type
Elite performance appraisal	Descriptive
Goals setting	Process
Strategic deployment	Descriptive
Administrative system reform	Descriptive
Optimize the program structure	Process
Strengthen the international communications	Process
Situating the elite sport at the macro socio-political level	Themeing
Value orientation	Themeing

Table 2: Sample Broad Code Categories

Results

The themes that emerged from the broad code categories are: performance-based framing pattern, organization-based framing pattern, ideology-based framing pattern, and rationales of U23 regulations. In the next few sections, the researcher will present these themes as theme passages. The theme passages were composed of representative codes derived inductively from the coding process, and quotes that reveal the attitudinal and factual information about the actors on the central phenomenon. To distinguish with quotes, phrases of codes are underscored in the following sections.

Performance-Based Framing Pattern

As one of the ultimate goals and an objective standard of elite sport development, the performance appraisal, achievement and goal are frequently utilized as strong reasoning tools to support arguments. In this case, the government departments, sport administrators and governing bodies frame the significance of developing Olympic athletes in sport policy documents using discourses related to performance.

Usually the policymakers start with assessment of past elite performance. Highlighting the elite sport achievements is always an indispensable part of the assessment. *The 1994-2000 The Summary of the Olympic Glory Plan*, notes that: “elite sports have stepped out to the world...have composed splendid chapters of the Chinese people in the history of Olympics (SPCSC, 1995).” The assessments do not only list all the achievements, but also focus critically on the strengths and weaknesses. Regarding the weakness, for example, *the 2001-2010 The Summary of the Olympic Glory Plan* maintains that the Chinese elite sports “are still significantly behind the U.S. and Russia

in terms of overall athletic power, despite of the substantial progress made in past six years (GAS, 2002).” Evaluating the strengths and weaknesses is multi-dimensional, addressing many aspects of Chinese elite sports including “structure of sport programs”, “team building”, “sport sciences” and “administrative system’. The international nature of elite sport leads the policymakers to look outside and to identify meaningful facts, including various global trends of elite sports. For example, *the 13th Five-Year Plan* for Elite Sports points out that

“The intensified competitive level in the Olympics increases the difficulty of winning in the Rio Janeiro and Tokyo Olympic Games. The integration and globalization of economy and sport, as well as the elevating public sporting needs, impose higher demands for the development of elite sports” (GAS, 2016).

More importantly, the trends identified are usually not restricted to the Olympics. 2001-2010 The Summary of the Olympic Glory Plan reflects the “bifurcate thesis” of elite sport development as it mentions both “increasing global attention on the Olympic performance and ranking” and “acceleration of professionalization and commercialization process (GAS, 2002).” Apparently, assessments of this kind could serve as factual basis for later goal setting.

Goal setting plays a vital role in the performance-based framing as well because it provides guidance as to the performance level that the Chinese elite sport system intends to achieve. In most of the policy documents collected, the goal setting components are usually demonstrated as section headings. For example, the *1994-2000 The Summary of the Olympic Glory Plan* contains three sections of goal setting: “Institutional,

Administrative Reform Goals”, “Basic Power Goals”, and “Performance Goals” (GAS, 1995). In the new millennium, both the *2001-2010 The Summary of Olympic Glory Plan* and the *2001-2010 Summary of the Sport Reform and Development* adopt more brevity, containing only one comprehensive section dedicated to all specific goals (GAS, 2002). Performance goals vary in their forms of expression. Qualitative goals are descriptive and comprehensive, and usually connect to specific actions. In 2002, the GAS states the overall performance goal of elite sport, “to continue the high up gold medal ranking in 2004 Summer Olympics, reinforce and expand the advantaged sport programs, lay good foundation for the 2008 Games...to sufficiently exploit the advantages as hosting nation, and fully engaged the Olympic competitions...” (GAS, 2002). Quantitative goals are relatively absolute and precise, which in general appear as numerical expressions such as ranking, medal counts, number of programs and percentages. In the same year, the GAS specifies that “about 100 small programs of 14 to 16 large programs should enter the competitions for medals (in the 2008 Games).” While in the *1994-2000 The Summary of the Olympic Glory Plan*, the SPCSC assigns tasks on improving the athletic level, such as: “among all the Olympic athletes, the percentage of international level and elite level athletes should increase to 4% and 40% respectively” (SPCSC, 2007). By setting these goals, the GAS was able to demonstrate the policy necessity of prioritizing the development Olympic athletes for improving Chinese elite sport performance.

Organizational-Based Framing Pattern

The policymakers are more than just sport advisory committees that express opinions on maximizing the performance in sport competitions. They are also concerned

with organizational issues such as administrative reform, institutional changes and optimization, funding, situating the sporting affairs in larger socio-economic context. For example, *the 12th Five-Year Plan* comments on the sport industry: “(during the last five years) the sport industry developed rapidly and became the highlight of civil economy” (GAS, 2011). In the next Five-Year Plan, the connection between elite sports and economy, politics and many other spheres of the Chinese society was updated: “(we) need to fully explore and realize the unique influence and the comprehensive functions of elite sports in building a healthy nation, promoting the transformation of economy structure, improving the national integrity and culture competitiveness” (GAS, 2016). Therefore, it is evident that the policymakers highly value the significance of prioritizing the development of Olympic athletes since they actively deploy reform and development plans to solve the existing issues in Chinese sporting affairs including those caused by unsatisfying elite sport development. Among all the issues mentioned, the impact of the Chinese society’s transformation becomes crucial for the administrative reform. *The 2001-2010 Summary of Sport Reform and Development*, claims, “the acceleration of urbanization and the transition of social structure is an opportunity for developing sports, and they entail the reform of government in dealing with sporting affairs and the establishment of sport service system” (GAS, 2000).

As early as in 1984, the Central Committee of the CPC states the need to ensure the funding of sport, “to guarantee the grand development of sporting affairs, we must gradually increase the expenditure on sport and related infrastructures and must incorporate it into the civil economy and social development plans of all level of

governments.” Additionally, the *1994-2000 The Summary of the Olympic Glory Plan* reiterates, “the state and social’s total funding of Olympic programs should grow annually” (SPCSC, 2007). The primary state-sponsored sport system also adjusted its funding model over time, in 1993, the SPCSC illustrates its overall reform objective: “to change the highly concentrated sport system, which solely dependent on state’s administrative measure, under the old planned economy” (SPCSC, 2005). Entering the new millennium, the GAS distinguishes the funding schemes between central and local finance, that the former being responsible for “national and international level sport competitions and activities”, while the latter mainly serving the “facility constructions and mass participation sports” (GAS, 2000).

Although some institutional changes reflect the shift from the state-sponsored system towards, one consistent theme throughout is to stick with the “Olympic Strategy”. In 1993, the SPCSC maintains that the “centralized management, long-term training should be exclusive for a few advantaged Olympic programs” (SPCSC, 2005). Since 1994, domestic competitions at elite level were also tailored to benefit the strategy: “besides setting the programs based on the Olympics accordingly, the National Games should reflect the policy of prioritizing the development of advantaged Olympic sports in terms of rule-making” (SPCSC, 2007). The Olympic-centric strategy also extends to the international athletic communication. For example, the *1993 The SPCSC’s Opinion on Deepening the Reform of Sport System* speaks of the oversea involvement of sports: “... (we need to) strive for developing international sport market and enhance the commercial communication of sports globally...” “broadly adopt the advanced foreign techniques,

talents and management approaches, and reinforce the communication with adjacent and sport-developed countries in a planned manner...” (SPCSC, 2005). Redefining the term of reference of government departments and social sport groups like national governing bodies and associations is a major aspect of administrative reform. Admittedly, the increasing autonomy of associations is considered a sign of less administrative interference, The GAS states one of its goals of sport reform and development, “to construct a multi-dimensional sport service system that faces the public, and an elite sport system that benefits the ‘Olympic Strategy’” (GAS, 2000).

Ideology-Based Framing Pattern

It is virtually impossible to understand the framing pattern by examining the policy discourse out of the ideological contexts. Traditionally, the policymakers have been emphasized the importance of combining the ideologies with specific policies. In 1984, the Central Committee of CPC points out that “it is necessary to proceed the education of patriotism, collectivism, socialism, and communism through sport achievements...” (CCCPC, 2004). Moreover, Chinese-specific socialism, CPC theories, Chinese traditional values, as well as Olympic ideals, sportsmanship and various western ideologies exert substantial influences on the justification of prioritizing the development of Olympic athletes.

There is a belief that the “Olympic Strategy,” the highest priority of elite sport development, is closely align with resisting the downsides of the professionalization and commercialization of Chinese sport system. In the *2001-2010 The Summary of the Olympic Glory Plan*, the GAS (2002) identifies a series of challenges facing in the field

of sport, such as “excessive commercialization”, “prevalence of doping” and “sport violence”. To deal with such challenges, the GAS proposes that for building elite sport teams, it is crucial to “...to closely combine the improvement of athletic level, emphasis of cultural education, and enhancement of spiritual civilization”.

On the flip side, emphasizing the equal status of improving athletic excellence and the ideological works in the overall elite sport development plan suggests a reciprocal relationship between promoting sport affairs and realizing positive values and ideologies. Numerous comments reflect the perception of how elite sport success could function as an instrument for advancing ideologies. Extrinsically speaking, there are statements like “through sport achievements, establish the revolutionary spirits of striving for national reputation, in order to accelerate the modernization of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology...” Intrinsically, “spirits of Chinese sportsmanship”, “professional ethics”, “fair play”, “purity of sport” are among the most frequently mentioned.

Theories derived from the CPC’s each generation of leadership also become the guiding thoughts and principle of directing developing elite sport, which are being updated and enriched by each government and party’s term of office. For example, the *1994-2000 The Summary of the Olympic Glory Plan* mentions the “Chinese-specific socialism theory by Deng Xiaoping and the party’s basic line” (SPCSC, 2007). In *the 2001-2010 The Summary of the Olympic Glory Plan*, it adds “Three Represents” developed by Deng’s successor Jiang Zemin (GAS, 2002). In *The General Office of the State Council’s Guideline on Accelerating the Development of Sport Industry*, the

General Office of the State's Council (2010) puts the "Scientific Outlook on Development" ahead of everything in guiding principles section, which was raised by Hu Jintao. Likewise, the latest social and economic development initiatives - *the 13th Five-Year Plan*, lists ideals and political goals such as the "Four Comprehensives" and "Chinese Dream" by Xi Jinping as guiding principle for developing elite sports (GAS, 2016). Basically, the highest-level elite sport policy documents during the past three decades have incorporated each generation of top leader's most representative political thought correspondingly.

Rationales of U23 Regulations

Since the making and implementation of policies that address focused, specific issues is a top-down process, justifying the regulations on U23 and foreign players has its presence on policy documents at multiple administrative hierarchies, from long-term development plan to specific announcement of professional league.

Regulation surrounding U23 players by its nature is an issue related to topics including youth development, professional league development and national and Olympic teams, which are all important components of the long-term reform and development plan of Chinese soccer. In 2015, the State Council (2015) states the goals of Chinese soccer development at different stages, "in the short-term...to form the coordinative development pattern between soccer public affairs and industry". It continues with performance goals, "in the mid-term, the organizing and competition level of professional league should enter the top tier of Asia, so does the men's national team". It also looks

forward to the long-term that such level should “make substantial progress and enter the world’s top tier”.

Regarding cultivating talents, the State Council (2015) encourages “the clubs, corporates and other social entities drafting and sending professional and youth players to train and compete in developed soccer countries and high-level leagues.” Recruiting for the national team is also at stake: “national team players should be recruited from all professional clubs...so that the national team will be ensured as the best team in terms of condition, playing level, teamwork at any time of recruitment”. Most importantly, the plan elucidates the criterion of coordinating the interests of national team and professional clubs: “comprehensively weighing the cycle of international competition and domestic competition fixture...clubs should be conscious of the big picture, and fully support the development of national team” (GOSC, 2015).

The *2016-2050 The Mid-to Long-Term Development Plan of Chinese Football* incorporates the improvement of professional league into *the 13th Five-Year Plan*: “strengthen the team building at all age levels in professional clubs, enlarge the influence of professional league. Improve the brand value of Chinese Super League and raise the attendance to world top level” (NDRC et al., 2016; GAS, 2016). Not surprisingly, the players’ registration, which is the core issue of the aforementioned regulations on U23 players, is also one of the concerns in the Plan: “establish and regulate the registration rules of players, coaches, referees and other personnel, optimize the mechanisms of compensating player’s cultivation and transfer, promote the integration with the international prevailing standards” (NDRC et al., 2016).

Unlike overarching development plans, issue-oriented policy documents at the executive level such as announcements, rules and opinions usually contain less generalized, profound but more concrete and pragmatic justifications of regulation. As the first policy that made adjustments on regulating U23 players since the launch of the long-term development plan, the Additional Announcement made the following changes in January, 2017: “the starting 11 and 7 substitute players, should include a minimum of two U23 players (Chinese player born after Jan 1st, 1994 and not from Hong Kong, Macau or Taiwan), with at least one U23 in the starting eleven players” (CFA, 2017e). The CFA (2017e) states that its purposes are: “to further carry out the spirits of ‘The Overall Reform and Development Plan of Chinese Football’, to enhance the cultivation of Chinese soccer talents, and to promote the healthy, sustainable development of Chinese soccer and professional league”. Later in February, the CFA (2017b) reiterates the policy changes on U23 players along with several other measures approved by its executive committee. This time it includes additional purposes to justify the changes, that the association is taking measures to “solve the aggravated irrational investments, prevailing deficits, weak foundation of youth development, and inadequate expenditure on infrastructure, of clubs in the Chinese Super League and China League One” (CFA, 2017b; CFA 2017c).

In response to the problem of clubs exploiting the loopholes by subbing off the required U23 player early in the match, the CFA (2017d) revised its policy in May, claiming that the total appearances of U23 players in each match must equal to the foreign players’. To support this policy revision, it argues that the new policy aims at

“further training the youth players through professional league and motivating the clubs to increase efforts on cultivating youth soccer talents” (CFA, 2017d).

Summary of Results

Four themes: performance, organizational, ideology-based framing pattern and rationales of U23 regulations provide a way to answer the research question of how the policy documents frame significance of prioritizing the development of Olympic athletes. For the series of regulations on U23 players since early 2017, this study shows that the rationales behind have inherited the overarching principles for previous all-compassing national level sport policies, especially those related to the Olympic Strategy. In general, they include improving the overall quality of professional league and performance of national team. Although some soccer professionalization prospects such as integration with international standards and implementing financial rationality enter the justification from time to time, the ultimate rationale remains on serving the Olympic-centric elite development. As a result, the series of regulations on U23 players is an exemplification of prioritizing the development of Olympic athletes over professional soccer players once the policy conflict arises between the two elite development initiatives.

For decades, major actors including government departments and the CPC’s organ of power – its central committee, regard the prioritization in the Olympic Strategy as imperative for improving elite sport performance, furthering administrative reform of various sport organizations and realizing crucial ideologies through sporting affairs. Regardless of the policy importance of soccer professionalization, it cannot surpass the

high standing of the Olympic Strategy in the hierarchy of Chinese sport system, at least from an elite development perspective.

Discussion

Prioritizing the Olympics as the guiding principle

One of the major implications from the finding on the rationale of U23 regulations is that it confirms the conflicting relationship between some professionalization goals and the prioritization in elite sport policies, which has been a familiar theme in the previous research (Fan & Lu, 2013; Tan & Bairner, 2010; Hu & Henry, 2016; Hu & Henry, 2017). It is also a major factor of problematizing the national (including Olympic) team-centric guiding principle in the elite development policy contexts. The “conflicting” argument is also consistent with the bifurcated nature of elite development as it recognizes the multiplicity of objectives in developing elite athletes. At the superficial level, Fan and Lu (2013) reveal that the false belief of improved professional league granting better national team performance led to massive disappointment among fans. Tan and Green (2008) offer explanations on what causes the incompatibility, stating that “the depth of the struggle over priorities between emergent commercial clubs and national team development” is a unique part of tension existing in Chinese elite sport system. Yet according to the finding, the policy documents of Chinese soccer have been unremittingly juxtaposing, if not associating, the needs to develop professional league and national team at many levels, from long-term development plans to adjusting the quota of U23 players. Therefore, if future policymakers fail to better reflect the complex relationship between these two initiatives at least in justifying the policies, it is likely that the public disappointment will continue.

Another premise is the existence and effectiveness of a policy platform that enables the Olympic Strategy to impose impact on the related area of elite sport. To the expectation of the researcher, this study confirms the significance of the Olympic Strategy in guiding the elite development through the examination of the framing patterns in the policy documents. Studies with different research designs acknowledge that such significance exists to various degrees, including analysis of China's drive for elite sport success in 2008, overview of state sport policies, examination of the discursive construction process of the Olympics in the Chinese elite sport system, etc (Tan & Green, 2008; Wei et al., 2010; Hu & Henry, 2017). However, it becomes problematic as this study explores how sport administrators refer to such significance in justifying the regulations in the domain of professional soccer in China. Specifically, national team-centric regulations on elite development verifies the alleged policy impact of Olympic Strategy on the professionalization of soccer. Nonetheless, past policy documents did recognize, and have exerted a certain level of efforts in addressing the potential clash between fulfilling the professionalization goals and fully implementing the Olympic Strategy (GAS, 2002; CFA, 2015). Regrettably, to the detriment of soccer, the national team-centric guiding principle naturally preserves the priority of the Olympic Strategy while sacrifices the professionalization scheme once conflicts arise. Although the scholarly attention regarding the recent manifestation of the policy conflict in Chinese professional soccer is still scarce, both the domestic and international media have initiated public discussions on this controversial topic (Atkins, 2017; Yao & Wang, 2018; Brennan, 2018). It is notable that many commentaries view the policy conflicts that

introduce new problems to the unsatisfactory professionalization as unnecessary and need to be resolved. For example, the “handicapped” league quality, disruption to the level playing field, deteriorated league brand value are all among the problems after the establishment of the U23 regulations since 2017. Therefore, future research should focus on generating possible solution to optimize the policymaking and minimize the policy conflicts between the Olympic Strategy and soccer professionalization, especially in elite development.

The finding of such justifications is also crucial for the central research question because it offers a new perspective of professional soccer to understand how the Chinese elite sport system developed after the 2008 Beijing Olympics. More importantly, facilitating this understanding could benefit the legacy study of the Beijing Games, in particular the sport development legacy. As there are many of qualitative and quantitative studies published that systematically evaluate the sport development legacies before and after the London Olympics, with most of which paying attention to several UK-specific problems such as declined youth sport participation level. In addition, they notice emerging legacy problems such as, legacy governance, and sustainable legacy (Mahtani et al., 2013; Girginov & Hills, 2008; Leopkey & Parent, 2012; Homma & Masumoto, 2013). Likewise, the connection between the Beijing Games legacy and the soccer professionalization deserves more scholarly attention as no other country like China is experiencing such a rapid growing professional sport market, at least among the past few Olympic hosts. The literature review concludes that there are several propositions have been formed at different time points regarding which path this system would be led to

(Hong et al., 2005; Wei et al., 2010; Fan & Lu, 2013). Based on the understanding of the series of U23 regulations since 2017, the evidence supports the notion that the Olympic Strategy remains the highest priority and the existing elite sport system is maintained, if not reinforced in the post-Beijing Olympics era. This is not to completely negate all the claims that the Chinese elite sport system reform is developing towards a more commercialized, market-oriented model, with less administrative interferences in management and policymaking processes. Instead, the researcher maintains that confirming the dominance of national team-centric guiding principle in the most recent policies exposes the shortcomings of current reform situation. Consequently, the researcher anticipates that future research is likely to find solid evidences supporting the idea that the sport development legacy of the Beijing Games is partial and imbalanced, skewing towards the Olympic athlete while disappointing the professional development.

Administration reform

A noteworthy implication of the results at the organizational level is the incomparable change of the power structure accompanied by the organizational change made in the Chinese soccer system. As it would require a separate study to cover the administration reform progress of Chinese elite sport system, this paper will only briefly introduce the most influential institution change in professional soccer in 2016 and illustrate possible further research directions.

In the state-sponsored sport model, the Management Centers of various sport programs under the direct control of the government department for sporting affairs - the GAS, are the *de facto* governing bodies. The Soccer Management Center was created in

1994 with its “leadership and general functions” being identical to those of the CFA. Specifically, the CFA title was used to connect with international organizations and the Soccer Management Center title was used to interact with the domestic political system (Tan & Green, 2010). Therefore, the CFA, like many other associations for various sports, did not essentially qualify as a completely independent social organization since the Soccer Management Center administers all the soccer affairs until 2015. As Fan and Lu (2013) point out, the administrative reform of soccer did not touch the most fundamental part of the elite sport system, which was to establish the independent status of CFA and the league from the government. *The Adjustment and Reform Plan of the CFA* in 2015 made substantial reform on the administration of soccer. The Plan terminated the direct subordinate relation between the CFA and the GAS by cancelling the Soccer Management Center. Although the CFA continues to connect with the CPC and the GAS in many ways, it has gained autonomy in the formal organizational structure over issues such as “internal agency settings, making of work plan, finance and wage management, personnel management” and so on (CFA, 2015).

Hence, how to reconcile the conflict between the Olympic Strategy and professionalization goals in specific policies that deal with elite development issue after the CFA’s independence becomes a crucial indicator of the administrative reform. It can reflect how large this reform has contributed to the coeval soccer professionalization regarding improving the policy conditions for developing professional soccer players. Moreover, given the increasing policy and social attention paid to professional soccer, it is expected that the increased autonomy of the CFA and less administrative interference

from the GAS should reduce, if not eliminate the impact of the Olympic Strategy on professional soccer. However, based on the analysis of the regulations on U23 players since the 2015 Plan, the CFA clearly did not promote the priority level of developing professional soccer athletes from an elite development policy perspective. Basically, it is true that soccer once again took the pioneering role in the Chinese elite sport system that pushed forward the general sport reform initiative - a shift from the state-sponsored, highly concentrated to a more socialized, market-oriented model, just like being the first sport to embrace the professionalization in 1993. One should also be conscious of the problem that the administrative reform endeavor of the professional soccer so far is still inadequate for its inability in settling a long-standing policy conflict in elite development. In the post-2008 Olympic era, when the national level sport policy documents still suggest maintaining the “Juguo Tizhi” – the whole country support system, for China to achieve elite sport success, the Olympic Strategy remains the highest priority in the policy-making agenda of an unprecedentedly autonomous CFA (Hu and Henry, 2016).

Two major factors could explain the lackluster policy conditions of developing professional soccer players following the seemingly fundamental administration reform. First, one must realize the timing of the announcement of the 2015 Long-Term Development Plan, which is regarded as the most recent overarching policy document that guides the following regulations in professional soccer. The period since the 2015 reform might be too short to assess its real effect on the professionalization. In fact, the proposal to end the “One Protocol and Two Licenses” administration of soccer, which is to essentially terminate the function of the Soccer Management Center and make the

CFA autonomous from the GAS, was brought out years before the final official implementation (CFA, 2012). It is reasonable to consider the possibility of taking a longer time for the CFA to create policy that fully prioritizes the professionalization goals rather than giving way to the Olympic Strategy as before. Second, hard performance goal settings could exacerbate the pressures on the officials in the CFA. The *2020 Action Plan of the CFA*, has made clear a series of national and Olympic men's teams performance objectives as far as 2020 (CFA, 2017). Based on the recent playing level of Chinese U23 players and the major opponent teams in the competitions, the goals are not only higher than expected but also close to unrealistic. With the AFC U23 Championship and the 2020 Tokyo Olympic coming up, it is highly possible that the recent U23 regulations are considered as a pressure-forced choice with the hope of boosting the performance level of players at this age level in a relatively short period.

Shifting but stable ideological pattern

It has been over three decades since the PRC's debut in the stage of international elite sport competition, which is roughly the same length as the history of the Olympic Strategy. During this period, the domestic society of China witnessed enormous changes in the sphere of ideologies as this country actively globalizes at an incredible speed. However, sport in China, as an indispensable component of economic, civil and cultural life, like in many other countries, functions as "frozen space" that resist changes and offer newcomers few opportunities for entry (Markovits & Rensmann, 2010). To explain the reasons of sport management being instrumental for social change, Chalip (1996) claims that policies themselves direct, redirect, or constrain social, political, and economic

behavior. Moreover, the elite sport management in Chinese context is significantly influenced by ideological factors (Hu & Henry, 2016). The strong theoretical connection between policies and ideologies makes it feasible to explore one's implication on the other. Thus, by examining the Olympic Strategy, which remains a constant part in the Chinese elite sport policies across different era, an immobile pattern of ideologies emerges from the policy documents.

The primary indication on the findings related to ideologies is the perennial emphasis on the ideologies' importance in almost every field of sporting affairs, including elite development and soccer professionalization. This resonates with the findings of many studies that deal with Chinese elite sport. In an article analyzing the role of Chinese government in sport globalization, Tan and Bairner (2010) elaborate how sport administrators use "ideological education" to counter the negative impact of commercialization among elite athletes. From another perspective, this study confirms such theme with evidence of policymakers stressing the importance of prioritizing the development of Olympic athletes. Furthermore, this study extends the theme by providing evidences from the U23 regulations since 2017. As *The CFA's Announcement on Normalizing the Management of Professional Clubs* specifies, the need for fighting off negative impacts of commercialization stays at the forefront of the policy rationales. Without explicit expression of any specific ideology, it is still obvious that the up-to-date policy documents in professional soccer not only maintain the priority of the Olympic Strategy, but also sustain the ideological framing pattern in justifying the regulations. Apart from claiming the function of reducing negative effects, the ways of assigning

significance are also demonstrated by attributing sporting achievement to factors including ideological ones. According to Hong et al. (2005), China's sporting success has served not only as evidence of ideological superiority and economic prosperity, but also as a totem of national revival since the 1980s.

The convergence of findings between this paper and other literature regarding the role of ideologies in Chinese elite sport policies suggests new area of inquiry (Hu & Henry, 2017; Tan & Green, 2008; Tan & Bairner. 2010). First, it appears that the social and economic environment of the Chinese elite sport system has remain highly stable, even largely unchanged in terms of ideological consciousness. Second, the effectiveness of using elite sport as a tool for curbing the negative and promoting the positive ideologies might cause the persistence of incorporating ideologies into policies. The continuing emphasis on its significance in the policy space does not necessarily mean that the current ideological condition of Chinese elite sport is identical compared to that of three decades ago when the Olympic Strategy was first created. As this paper identifies the invariable part of ideologies reflected in the elite sport system, future research can turn focus to the cases of sport that represent the shifting parts.

Limitations of Study

Many researchers are bounded by the limitations of research conditions. This research is no exception. Objectively, many aspects of the research method including the selection of data analysis approach and data collection strategy are inevitably constrained by time, resource availability, cost, etc. Maintaining the balance between the requirement of maximally addressing the research question and the objective research limitations is

the primary concern throughout the conduct of research. Limited research time made it impossible to conduct time-consuming studies such as travelling to research site, interviewing, surveying or observing human participants. Limitations of institution affiliation and internal network also became obstacles for accessing certain research opportunities and sources. For example, the researcher learned at the beginning through communicating with other scholars that the CFA had called for research projects on the 2017 soccer reform and development, which was posted in April 2017 (CFA, 2017). But the current research was not affiliated with any Chinese institutions thus making it ineligible for application. With all the constraints and accessible sources at hand, document analysis became a feasible research method because of time and cost saving concern as well as its exemption from involving human participants. Not to the researcher's surprise in a cross-cultural, multiple fields research, the language issue played a role of double-edged sword. Bilingual proficiency allowed the researcher to investigate the documents in Chinese domain and present the study in English, while making it exceptionally hard to find intercoder that is bilingual and well-informed in the related research field.

Glossary

AFC: Asian Football Confederation

CCCPC: The central committee of the Communist Party of China

CFA: Chinese Football Association

CL: China League, the second-tier league in the Chinese professional soccer system

COC: Chinese Olympic Committee

CPC: Communist Party of China

CSL: Chinese Super League, the first-tier league in the Chinese professional soccer system

GAS: General Administration of Sport, the current Chinese government department of sport

GOSC: General Office of The State Council

IOC: International Olympic Committee

Juguo Tizhi: Chinese phrase referring to the primarily state-sponsored, centrally managed sport system

NGB: National governing body

ME: Ministry of Education

NOC: National Olympic Committee

PRC: The People's Republic of China

RDDSC: The Reform and Development Department of The State Council

ROCOC: Republic of China Olympic Committee

SPCSC: State Physical Culture and Sports Commission, the former Chinese government department of sport

State Council: The chief government agency of the People's Republic of China

U23: Players who are under 23 years old

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